
BROKKEN ROAD
ROMANCE
BROKKEN PURSUIT
AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR
P. CREEDEN

Brokken Pursuit

Brokken Road Romances

P. Creeden

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Brokken Pursuit

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Synopsis: Can a broken and forgotten sister get back the pursuit she's denied?

Hannah Beth Walsh isn't pretty or capable like her sisters. She can't attract a husband, even when there's a town full of eligible bachelors. So, she decides to pursue a career she knows she's more than qualified for—becoming Brokken's new school teacher. But when the mayor hires another teacher, not knowing about Hannah's placement, she's stuck being a teaching assistant until the end of the term, with the promise that one of them will move on next year.

Oliver Holt lost his leg after serving in the War only two months. To keep his spirits up, he threw himself in his studies in order to be well qualified as a teacher out west. But when he gets to Brokken, he finds himself taking away the position of a fiery young woman who keeps her heart on her sleeve. And he can't help it, but he's developing feelings for her.

Chapter 1

Hannah Walsh ran a hand through her unruly, light brown hair and peered in the mirror. She wished she was as pretty as her sister, Lydia, or as strong and tall as her other sister, Rebecca. Instead she was just plain, plump, and bookish. She didn't mind being those things, but part of her always longed for something more. She smoothed down her brown dress and pinned back the sides of her hair. Once satisfied, she gave herself a nod and then headed out of the bedroom she once shared with both her sisters before Rebecca married.

Lydia's lilting laugh was the first sound to reach her ears. "It's going to be grand. Just wait and see. The whole town will be talking about this wedding for years. I don't want a plain and simple church wedding. Or something thrown together just so the vows are said. Fritz and I plan a beautiful spring wedding. It's going to be perfect."

Blonde curls framed Lydia's face perfectly. Her eyes sparkled the same shade of blue as her dress. When she glanced up and noticed Hannah, Hannah nearly blushed, because she'd been looking at her sister's bosom. Hannah swallowed and looked away.

"There you are, Hannah Beth. If you don't hurry, you're going to be late for your first day of class." Lydia said as she waved Hannah over to a bowl of porridge set in front of her usual place at the table.

Hannah mumbled a "good morning" to her mother and kissed the matron's cool cheek. Then she slid in her seat next to Lydia and across from their youngest brother, Noah. Noah's eyes remained closed as he spooned bites of porridge into his mouth, half-asleep. Hannah lifted an eyebrow. Had Lydia been talking to their half-asleep brother, or to their mother who seemed to have been dealing with fits of dementia for the better part of the year?

"I don't really like that man, Lydia, he's the talk of the town and not in a good way," Mama said.

"Hodgepodge, Mama. That's only because not everyone in town knows the full story. They'd all see Fritz as the hero he is if they did."

The kitchen door swung open, letting in a gust of cold air and Rebecca, laughing at something Jake had just said. Rebecca's cheeks

were ruddy, and her face lit up with the joy of life. Hannah wondered how everyone could be so full of energy so early in the morning, when, if it wasn't her first day of work as the school teacher, she'd be feeling more like Noah than anyone else in the room. Her porridge grew cold. She shoveled it down quickly even though she had almost no appetite. Butterflies filled her stomach instead. If she didn't know all the children well already, she'd have been shaking. The porridge had even less flavor than usual, but it made no difference to Hannah.

"Did you hear me, Hannah Beth?" Rebecca asked, making it through the cloud of thought surrounding Hannah's head.

She looked up at her sister. "Pardon?"

Rebecca tilted her head and gave her a wry smile. "I just asked if you were ready for today? I know you'll do great. Just stay focused, all right?"

Hannah nodded, picked up her bowl, and stood. "Thank you," she mumbled as she headed toward the wash basin.

Before she got there, Lydia pulled the bowl from her hands. "I'll take care of this. You'd better hurry or some of your students will make it there before you."

"Oh!" Hannah nodded and rushed to grab her bonnet before heading out the door.

The cool air outside kissed her cheeks as she jogged across the railroad tracks to the hotel directly across the street. Gray clouds overhead promised rain or possibly a bit of snow that afternoon. Hannah took some solace that the children would be meeting at the hotel, not too far away from her home or most of theirs, while they waited for the rest of the materials to arrive for the rebuilding of the school after the fire. Miss Edna had been preparing Hannah to take over the school at the start of the next school year, but her untimely death had pushed up the timeline. Before heading into the hotel, Hannah glanced up Main Street and spotted some of the children on their way, puffing clouds of breath behind them in the morning chill.

Butterflies. They danced a jig in her stomach from both nervousness and excitement. She wanted to do a good job. She'd just turned seventeen in August and didn't want anyone to look down on her because of her age. Miss Edna had always complimented her as the smartest student she'd had in forty years of teaching in Brokken. She wouldn't disappoint her mentor now that she was gone. Hannah was determined to do her best so that Miss Edna could look down from Heaven and see that she hadn't made the wrong choice by making Hannah her successor.

She stepped into the hotel and found Mrs. Sophia standing at the front desk. "Good morning, Miss Walsh."

Hannah offered her a wide smile, hoping she didn't look as

nervous as she felt. “Morning. Have any of the children arrived yet?”

“Only Missy. Sheriff Vic escorted her over about twenty minutes ago, I believe she’s helping Lavender in the kitchen. We’re preparing a snack for the children’s return. We want them to settle into this strange environment as quickly as possible.” Mrs. Sophia smiled wider.

“Thank you so much for thinking about the children. I’ll go see what I can do to help also.” Hannah nodded to her and then scurried toward the kitchen. Missy and Lavender were getting small tarts filled with strawberry jam ready. They set them at intervals in front of each seat along the bench at the long kitchen table.

Missy smiled when her gaze met Hannah’s. “What a fine way to start the first day of school term, right, Miss Walsh? The children are going to love these tarts, and it’s so warm in the kitchen they are going to really be comfortable here, I think.”

Hannah nodded toward Lavender. “You and Mrs. Sophia are doing the community a great service by allowing us to have our classes here for the next few weeks.”

Lavender waved a hand in dismissal. “It’s nothing. We love the children and want to support the community any way that we can.” Then she gestured for Hannah to come closer. “We set up this desk from one of the rooms for you, Miss Walsh. It can stay here in the kitchen until you don’t need it here anymore.”

“Thank you so much. I’m in awe of your generosity.” Hannah’s heart swelled at their kindness.

Pink tinged Lavender’s cheeks. “It’s nothing. Really.”

A small ruckus out in the hallway and a peal of high-pitched laughter let them know the first children had arrived. Hannah went out to usher them into the kitchen while Missy helped to get everyone seated in their rightful places. Each of the children gave her a small hug and told her how happy they were that she was going to be teaching them. Things were going more smoothly than Hannah could have hoped. The children appreciated seeing a familiar face, even if it wasn’t the one they were used to. Once all twelve children were seated, Missy led them in saying grace before they started eating their tarts.

The moment Missy said “Amen” the volume in the room rose as the children begin to converse joyfully over their morning snack. Hannah had her back to the kitchen door when it swung open toward her. A strapping, handsome young man came limping in with papers and books stacked in his arms. “I’m so sorry I’m late.”

Hannah blinked at him in confusion. Was he a guest at the hotel? What kind of business did he have? Surely, he should have sat in the dining room, not come into the kitchen. Then behind him, a pale Mrs.

Sophia met her gaze with eyes wide and uncertain. Behind her stood Mr. Mathew Knight, the Mayor.

Mr. Knight stepped forward with a wide smile and spread his arms out to the children. “It’s so good of you to all make it to the first day of class, even though we have yet to restore your schoolroom. Although it’s going to be tough, I know you all will adjust to new things quickly. The first step is to meet your new teacher, Mr. Oliver Holt. He’s the son of a good friend of mine, all the way from Virginia.”

“New teacher?” Lavender asked, blinking, and meeting eyes with Hannah.

Hannah’s heart dropped toward her stomach, quenching the butterflies. Confusion gripped her heart. What was going on?

Chapter 2

Hannah gaped at the mayor and the man standing next to him. Oliver Holt? Even though he stood six inches taller than Hannah, she was barely more than five feet tall, herself. His dark hair and eyes made him seem brooding, but kindness softened his features. She felt that perhaps his smaller stature would make him less imposing for the children. Kindness and meekness were good traits in a teacher.

Wait. What was she saying? She cleared her throat. “Mayor Mathew, Miss Edna already appointed me to be the children’s teacher before she passed. I’ve been trained for the position, and the children all need a familiar face right now, don’t you think?”

The mayor’s brow furrowed, and he studied Hannah as though seeing her for the first time. He set a hand to his chin and tilted his head. “I’d not heard of any such thing happening. As far as I knew, the children were to be without a teacher.”

“No, sir.” Mrs. Sophia stepped forward. “I thought everyone in town knew that Miss Walsh was to be the new teacher. The children knew, as did their parents.”

“With all the work we’ve had rebuilding, no one has thought to inform me of this,” Mr. Knight shook his head. “This is a conundrum. There aren’t enough children for two school teachers, and Mr. Holt has traveled all the way from Virginia to take the position. Besides that, he’s college-educated as well.”

Hannah’s heart sank a little in her chest as Mr. Knight studied her.

“You seem too young to have finished a college education yet,” he said finally.

A shudder ran through Hannah, but she did her best to suppress it. She was unused to standing up for herself. As a child, Rebecca, Lydia, or one of her brothers would do it for her. But today, she was taking on a grown woman’s position as teacher for the children, and as such, she needed to defend herself or everyone would treat her poorly. Her hands clenched into fists. “No, sir. I studied under Miss Edna and have a second-grade teaching certificate. I’m studying for the first-grade certificate, to earn it before the beginning of next September.”

“You’ve been tested then?” the mayor asked, scratching his chin

again.

"Yes, sir. Miss Edna made sure that I passed before she began training me to take over the class." Hannah's gaze flicked over to where Mr. Holt stood, one side of his lip tugged up in a crooked smile as he appraised her. She pulled her gaze away quickly as she felt heat rise to her cheeks.

"I'm not sure how to handle this situation." Mayor Mathew frowned. "I don't want to send Mr. Holt back to Virginia, but we have two qualified teachers in Brokken where we only need one. Is there any chance that you would continue in the role of assistant to the teacher we've already hired for the rest of this school year? Once the children break for summer, we can make a decision on who will stay and who will find another position."

Hannah didn't like it. She shook her head slightly, but Mr. Knight didn't see it.

He seemed so pleased with his compromise, that he just patted her on the shoulder and offered a, "Good girl."

Hannah's heart sunk. She was always the good girl, always the well-behaved, mild-mannered one. For once she wanted to yell and holler and have a fit the way Lydia did to get her way. But her cheeks heated further at the thought of doing that. When she peered over toward the children, she knew it would be a horrid mistake to have such a conniption. She'd never set that kind of example for the children.

Unfortunately, while she debated such things in her mind, the mayor slipped out the kitchen door. Mrs. Sophia gave her an apologetic look, bowed to her slightly, and then followed after the mayor. Lavender and Missy and even the children all looked at her expectantly. She forced a smile, nodded, and said, "Everything is fine. We'll work it out. Please, eat your tarts."

The children settled back into their usual chatter, filling the kitchen with their joy over the treats and pushing out the discomfiture. Mr. Oliver Holt remained standing against the wall on the other side of the door. He continued to give her that lopsided smile as she stepped over to him.

Her hands remained in fists as she faced him. She seethed as she spoke in a harsh whisper so as not to disturb the children. "Fine. I'll be your assistant for this term, but once the school year is through, I expect to take on the full role of teacher for this school. I've lived in Brokken all of my life and know these children better than anyone other than their parents."

He nodded. "I don't doubt anything you've just said, Miss..."

"Hannah. Hannah Walsh."

"Miss Walsh. And you may call me Oliver."

OLIVER TOOK an immediate liking to Miss Hannah Walsh. He could see the fear in her wide, doe eyes, and yet she showed great courage when she spoke out before the mayor and stood up to Oliver. She wasn't going to allow herself to be bullied, even though fear wanted to let her be. He had respect for the young woman's bravery. Her ruddy complexion and chubby cheeks reminded him of a fresh bread roll and told him that she was barely much older than the eldest student in the class.

"Fine," she said. "Oliver. Miss Lavender has a prepared a desk for the teacher at the head of the long table." She gestured toward it. "You may set your things there. I've prepared a lesson for today if you'd like to look at what I've prepared. We're only on a half-day schedule until the new school building is finished, so only need lessons for the next four hours. Then the children will be free to go home for lunch."

Even though Oliver had spent most of the evening before creating a detailed lesson plan, he decided to defer to Miss Walsh for today. Although he enjoyed watching the fire in her eyes when she expected conflict from him and the way her nose crinkled right before she spoke when defending herself, he didn't want to start any more arguments with her today. He'd rather have peace than have the lovely young woman hate him. He nodded. "Please, show me your plans for the day."

The lady's face softened a bit, and the smallest of smiles appeared. Not enough to light up the room, but enough to ease the tension in Oliver's shoulders. He followed her over to the teaching desk, taking note of how she peered down at his leg as he limped. He couldn't help but try to make the leg look as normal as possible, even though it was false. He didn't want her to show him pity because of it. He preferred not to douse the young woman's spirit. To Oliver's relief, she didn't acknowledge his gait or mention it. Once they reached the desk, she laid out her papers and showed him what she'd had planned for the day. A stack of slates sat to the right-hand side of the desk, and when the children finished their treats, Hannah had Missy pass out the slates.

As the children began their work, they split into two age groups. The fourth grade and younger children went with Hannah while Oliver took on the four older students. As with most one-room schools, the one in Brokken only taught up to the eighth grade. Beyond that, students had to do special study with a tutor, learn a trade, or go on to college to get further education. It wasn't what Oliver was used to in the east where he was from. He'd gotten a

classical education from tutors for the most part. But the children worked hard and showed a great deal of promise. While the older students were learning a bit about the five epochs of history, Hannah taught some of the youngest children some nursery rhymes and played a game. When Oliver glanced over, he was blessed with the brightest smile from Hannah he had seen thus far, even though it was not directed toward him. His breath hitched, and his heart thundered in his chest.

It remained on her lips until she glanced up and met eyes with him. Then her brow furrowed, and the smile slipped from her face as she turned from him and back to the children. Oliver's breath caught up with him as he looked away. It almost broke his heart to see her give him such a cold reaction. He swallowed. How did this girl already have so much control over his emotions? They'd only just met, and not under the best of circumstances. He let out a slow breath and glanced her way again. Her smile had returned, and somehow, that relieved the tension in his shoulders. He dragged his gaze away from her so as not to disturb her happiness again. Even though they might have met under strange duress, he hoped that they might at least come to a peaceable friendship with one another, though he already knew in his heart that he wanted nothing more than to see her smile all the time.

Chapter 3

Once things settled into a normal day, Hannah breathed a little easier. The children responded to her as well as they always had and seemed to adjust to the new surroundings quickly, too. She had to admit that she enjoyed being able to concentrate on the smallest children while leaving the older ones in Oliver's care. He was a competent, kind teacher, who smiled more than he frowned. The older ones seemed to take to him straight off. Though she felt the pinprick of jealousy in her heart over that as well, it was bittersweet. Her greatest fear in becoming the full-fledged teacher was how the older students would respond to her since she wasn't much older than them.

"What happened to your leg?" one of the older children asked Oliver as he limped from one side of the table to the other. Though she didn't want to glance in that direction, Hannah found herself straining an ear to hear the answer.

Oliver set his foot on the edge of the bench and pulled up his pants leg, exposing the wooden false-leg. He rapped his knuckles against it, drawing the attention of all the students, as well as Hannah's gaze. He smiled and said, "I served in the war for only two months when I was shot and had to have this amputated. It made it so that I went to college instead of spending more time on the battlefield."

"Wow," one of the boys said. "Does it hurt?"

Oliver shrugged. "Only when it rains."

Then he chuckled, which made the whole room laugh politely with him. It eased the tension that the male teacher was at least willing to joke about it. Hannah marveled at him a little. How could he be so nonchalant about losing a limb? How could he still have his spirits so high when he wasn't whole? Hannah had to make a conscious effort to smooth the furrows in her brow. She didn't think she could be so cheerful as he if she'd lost one of her limbs. With a deep breath, she tried to put it out of her mind and concentrate on the children's school work.

The end of the day came on more quickly then she realized. Lavender came in and let them know that it was already eleven in the morning. They were to finish their class sessions by that time to allow

the kitchen help to prepare lunch and tea for the guests in the hotel who required it. A general cheer rose up from the children as they realized their day of work had ended. They sprinted out of the building so quickly, one would have thought they'd spent an entire day inside. Hannah couldn't help but smile at them as she watched them go.

Missy stayed behind to help with cleanup, and with dread, Hannah headed over to where Mr. Holt sat at the teaching desk, to gather up her things. Mr. Holt looked up at her as she stopped beside the desk. He offered her a warm smile. "I'm sorry that we started out on the wrong foot, but I hope that we can work together for the benefit of the children. They can sense tension between adults, and I'd hate to stifle their learning because of personal conflict between their teachers. I'd never have accepted the offer of this position had I known the post was taken."

Hannah felt properly chastised. She'd been blaming Mr. Holt for the situation when it wasn't his fault at all. He'd actually done everything he could to accommodate her all day. She'd noticed he'd attempted to stay out of her way and allowed her to take on the lead position with the children. He'd been kind and willing to work with her. She let out a slow breath she didn't know she'd been holding and offered a hand. "You're right, Mr. Holt. Let us have a new beginning and work together for the sake of the students."

He stood and smiled wider, exposing the slightest dimple on both sides of his cheeks. His eyes sparkled with mirth as he took her offered hand. His warm hands enveloped hers, sending a shiver through her whole body that wasn't unpleasant. "Excellent," he said.

She swallowed as he released her hand and found herself wanting to run away from him. Flustered, she gathered up her things quickly, bobbed a quick curtesy, and then began for the door. She spotted Missy along the way. "Thank you for your help today, Missy. Do you want to walk with me?"

Missy nodded, gathering up her belongings and then rushing to catch up with Hannah. Together, they stepped out into the bright, late morning sun. Hannah's heart continued to race in her chest. She realized then, that he was the first man to take her hand in that way without gloves on. She'd met the men at the dance earlier in the year, in the same way, but through the gloves, the heat of their hands was muted. She couldn't feel every callous or line on their hand, as she'd just done with Mr. Holt. Unfamiliar feelings overwhelmed her. Now that she'd thought about it, no young man had ever looked at her the way he did or talk about wanting to be her friend.

"Miss Walsh, you're walking too fast. Where are we going?" Missy called out.

Hannah stopped in her tracks and turned toward the thirteen-year-old girl, blinking. She peered around from where she stood and realized she'd been heading the wrong direction, back through town, toward the old school building, where she always found solace when she'd had an argument with one of her sisters or Noah and needed someplace comforting and safe to be alone. Why did she need comfort now? And why was she dragging Missy along with her? She shook her head, still rattled by her own thoughts. Then she remembered an errand she needed to run anyway. "I need to stop by the general store and pick up some flour. I promised Lydia that I'd get some on the way back."

Missy smiled easily and pushed her straight brown hair behind her ears. "All right. I'll come with you. Sheriff Vic wants me to occupy my own time in the afternoons since we don't have school. Could I come back to the livery with you as well? I'll carry the sack of flour."

"Of course, you may." Relief released the tension in Hannah's shoulders. She enjoyed spending time with Missy while tutoring under Miss Edna. Missy was an easy young woman to get along with.

Cinnamon and other spices filled her nostrils the moment they entered the general store. She stepped straight up to the counter and then blinked in surprise at the man standing behind it. "Good morning, Mr. Forest."

Emmet Forest smiled wide, "Good morning to you, too, Miss Walsh."

"I don't know why, but I'd expected Curt to be back in the store. It's been a month since the Andrews gang attacked," she said with a frown, remembering the incident when the gang attacked and burned down the school and shot Miss Edna.

He nodded. "He'd planned to return but decided instead to visit family in Germany. He left quietly... about two weeks ago."

"Oh," she said in surprise. "I hadn't realized. Usually it's Lydia who makes trips to the store. I haven't been in quite a while."

Emmet's smile didn't falter. "No need to apologize. What can I do for you ladies this fine day?"

Hannah fell into a comfortable conversation with him and didn't fail to notice that it was easier talking to Mr. Forest than it had been to talk to Mr. Holt. She frowned at the thought when Emmet had his back turned toward her to get the flour. Missy had been wandering through the store with her hands folded behind her back. The young woman really didn't have much to do. Hannah decided that she must give the girl one of her novels to read when she came over to the livery. Hannah had spent hours during her school years with her nose in a book.

When Mr. Forest returned from the back with a sack of flour,

Hannah started to reach for it. Missy stepped forward and tut-tut'd her. "I told you that I'd carry the flour."

"Oh, if you insist." Hannah offered her a warm smile and let the younger girl carry the sack while they started back down Main Street to the livery.

The sun shone down from its zenith, warming Hannah's shoulders as she walked through town, greeting those whom she saw. A brisk breeze blew through her hair, reminding her it was still winter, and she'd neglected to put her bonnet on. Though she was glad for the warm spell, she worried for the daffodils that had already sprouted in front of town hall. She peered up at the building with different feelings than she usually had by it. Normally, she felt proud of her town and the people in it. They'd all been like family and stuck by each other, even in hard times—even as they'd all lost loved ones in the War. But when she glanced up at the building today, she didn't have those same feelings.

Though the town needed to invite men in order to infuse itself with strength and protection, they also brought with them too many other preconceived notions. They didn't know about how things had always been, and they didn't necessarily listen to the talk of the women in town. If Mayor Mathew had listened, he would have known that Miss Edna had chosen Hannah to be the next school teacher. He wouldn't have sent for another teacher. And Mr. Holt would have never come.

That was unfair of her. Mayor Mathew had been busy with rebuilding the town, he was overwhelmed with too many demands. The whole train of thought made Hannah frown at herself. She always had a difficult time keeping every thought captive. They always got away from her and tended toward hateful or jealous endeavors. If only she was stronger... maybe if she'd been a man instead. Maybe then she would have had more say in things and not get glossed over immediately just because of her age and small build. She sighed and continued walking.

By the time they got back to the house, it was nearly twelve-thirty. Lydia already had lunch on the table as they walked in. Mama sat in her usual rocking chair, sewing a quilt. Noah and Rebecca and Jake were nowhere to be seen. When Lydia saw Hannah come in through the door, her face puckered with pity. "Oh, Hannah Beth. I heard what happened. It's just awful. I can't believe they hired another teacher. From what I understand, he just showed up last night. No one had even seen him until this morning."

Hannah shook her head. "It's okay. Mayor Mathew said that I would work as Mr. Holt's teaching assistant for the term. I can just start teaching fully in September, which was what Miss Edna had

originally planned anyway."

Even as she said the words, she hardly believed them herself. Even though the words were true, she couldn't help but feel she was being slightly dishonest. Honestly, she was not okay. Not at all.

"That's fine then, I suppose," Lydia said, seeing Missy for the first time with the sack of flour. Lydia took the sack from her and nodded a greeting. Then she turned back to Hannah. "I just hate when you make a bunch of plans and believe things should turn out one way only for them to be dashed to bits."

Hannah nodded. At least her sister could understand how she felt. It made her feel a little bit better. Lydia was good at cheering people up and understanding people's feelings. It was often her best trait. "Do you have enough to allow Missy to stay for tea and perhaps supper? Sheriff Vic wants her to stay occupied, so we're going to do some private tutoring."

"Of course. I always make enough food to run a ranch, even though we don't have one." Lydia chuckled at her own joke as she turned to put the flour away.

Just then Noah crashed through the kitchen door, panting. "There you are!" He hollered, meeting gazes with Hannah. He rushed forward and grabbed hold of her arm.

Chapter 4

"Jake sent me to find you. Come on." Noah tugged Hannah's arm as he started back for the door. "I went to the hotel, but you weren't there."

Hannah pulled her arm from her little brother's grasp. "What's this about? I was just about to have tea with Lydia and Missy."

Noah peered around his sister, widened his eyes a bit at Missy, and then straightened and blushed. He shook his head. "No matter. Jake said it wouldn't take long."

"You still haven't said what it's about or acknowledged our company."

He pulled the hat from his head and bowed slightly toward Missy. "Sorry about that, Missy. It's good to see you." Then he shoved his hat back on his head and grabbed hold of her arm again. "Now come on. Jake wants to show you two kinds of desks for the school so you can pick which style you want the carpenter to build. They already been waiting nearly half an hour. So, come along!"

Hannah blinked, her heart fluttering in her chest. She didn't know she'd get to make this kind of decision. She peered over at Missy and offered her an apologetic smile. "Do you want to stay here and get tea or come with us?"

Missy laughed. "I'll come, too. I'd love to see what the desks are going to look like at the new school."

"Great." Hannah could hardly contain her excitement and having Missy smile and share in the revelry made her all that much giddier.

When they got to the carpenter's shop, Hannah felt the level of her excitement culminate until they rounded the corner and found Mr. Holt standing with Jake and the carpenter. Hannah's heart sank to her stomach for the second time in so many hours, and she felt the dread of what was to come.



OLIVER TURNED and saw the joy on Hannah's face fall at the sight of him again. It couldn't have hurt more if she had punched him in the

gut. He really needed for her to give him a chance instead of jumping to the conclusion that he was her enemy in every situation. She pursed her lips as she came forward and clasped her hands behind her back. She bobbed a small curtesy as her gaze brushed across his. “Mr. Holt.”

Then she curtseyed again toward Mr. Black, the carpenter, and offered him a greeting as well. Missy followed her lead. When she got to Jake, she shot a glance toward Oliver again. Her expression told him that she didn’t want him here, but just the same, he was already here, so he’d might as well make the best of it.

Oliver stepped toward Hannah. “It’s lovely to see you again so soon, Miss Walsh.”

She furrowed her brows at him. “Thank you.”

He huffed a laugh, trying to hold back the remainder of his mirth. She eyed him again, but he tried to keep an innocent face. Hannah was apparently trying to be cold to him. It was her nature to be honest. Everything about her expressions told Oliver that she couldn’t hide how she was feeling if her life depended upon it. He’d never quite met a female like her. Every other woman he’d met hid behind a veil of makeup and half-truths. They tended to be full of mystery and secrets. But Hannah Walsh didn’t seem to have a bit of guile in her. He didn’t doubt for a moment that she would be constant, unchanging, and terrible at keeping secrets.

Jake cleared his throat. “I called both of y’all here to see what you think of these desks. Mr. Black says that he can make the desks similar to the ones that you had before, or he can make these more modern desks like he’s seen back east.”

Oliver peered at the two drawings. He recognized the newer style of desk, made specifically for two children with drawers to put books in underneath. The older desks that had been in the school before were plain tables with benches. If they went with the newer desks, each child could have individual chairs, and according to the plan, it seemed what the carpenter intended. He looked up at Hannah and tried to read her expression. It seemed the obvious choice to go with the newer desks, but she seemed uncertain.

She met eyes with the carpenter. “What is the cost difference?”

The carpenter frowned and answered, “The newer desk makes the price almost one and a half times the price of the older ones.”

“The Brokkens are footing the bill for this, Hannah. You needn’t worry too much about the difference in price,” Jake added.

She shook her head. “Deborah and her family are trying to help rebuild the whole town. They only have so much money. If we pull too much of the resources for the school, then other parts of the town might suffer. I can’t have that. If we have to cut corners by going with

the plain desk that the children are already used to, then we should do it to help Deborah."

Unselfish. Oliver would need to add that to the growing list of virtues he continued to discover in Hannah's possession. He opened his mouth to ask the cost difference in total to offer to pay for it himself if he could afford it, but the carpenter himself spoke up. "If we forego the individual chairs and build benches the way that we had them before, we could cut the price difference in half. It would make it more affordable, and still allow the children to have the modern desk with the drawers."

Hannah offered Mr. Black a warm smile. "It would make me feel better if we could work out that compromise. I know the children would enjoy the extra storage space, and I also know they wouldn't mind sitting at benches they are already accustomed to."

Jake clapped his hands. "I think it's an excellent concession. How do you feel, Mr. Holt?"

Oliver lifted a brow and then smiled toward Hannah. "Well done. Excellent decision."

Hannah frowned at him again. "Are you saying you would have made the same choice without me?"

It was a challenge, and Oliver felt it. He carefully measured his words but didn't want to take too much time mulling them over for fear that his answer would sound contrived. "Honestly, I would have chosen the modern conveniences entirely. But that would have been a mistake. Because I am new to Brokken and don't know this Miss Deborah myself, I wouldn't have realized the extra burden I'd have been placing on the parties of interest. This was a decision better made by those who know the town and the children better than I."

She blinked at him, the wrinkles in her brow smoothing as if she were confused. Oliver enjoyed a long moment of her staring directly into his eyes as though searching the depths of his soul. Then she looked away quickly, the tips of her ears reddening. His breath hitched. He liked that he had an effect on her. It made him want to tease her more.

Surrounded by the scents of different kinds of wood and sawdust, Oliver forgot his surroundings for a moment and relished in the perfect hue of Hannah's skin. He'd nearly forgotten anyone else was present until Jake spoke again. "That's settled then. Will you have ample time to finish the desks before we have the school-raising party in two weeks?"

Mr. Black nodded, a wide smile on his face. "For certain."

A woman came around the corner of the shop, the sunlight glinting off the star pinned to her chest. She let out a big sigh. "There you are, Missy. The postman just brought in a bunch of letters, and one of

them is from your family back east. Come with me down to the sheriff's office and let's see what your family has said."

Missy's eyes went wide, and she nodded toward everyone. "Sorry to run, Miss Walsh."

Hannah smiled toward the girl and shook her head. "No need to apologize."

And the girl took off, running a little bit ahead of the sheriff toward the west side of town. The carpenter asked Jake to help him with moving some wood around, and the two older men both made their leave. Oliver was left alone with Hannah a moment. He cleared his throat. "May I escort you, Miss Walsh?"

She blinked at him again, but her gaze only glanced across his before she turned her face from him and nodded. They began to stroll side by side through town, back to the southside of Brokken. Noting their direction was away from where most of the residents lived, he asked, "Do you reside near the hotel?"

The sunlight glinted off her hair, accenting the golden highlights in the brown waves. "I do. My family runs the livery almost directly across the street from the hotel."

He nodded. "That's helpful then, that the school session is held at the hotel for now."

"Mrs. Sophie and Lavender are quite generous."

"I've noticed." He chuckled. "Lunch was served in quite generous portions for the hotel guests. I'm going to get quite robust in my figure as I stay there this term."

She eyed him with a lifted brow. "You're staying at the hotel? I thought you were staying with the mayor?"

He chuckled. "That was only last night as I came in on the late stage. I'll be staying at the hotel the rest of the term. I'd have liked to find another residence, as close to the school as possible, but I'm not sure I'm staying past this semester if they already have a qualified teacher here in Brokken."

Hannah's step faltered, and he reached over to steady her, one hand catching her elbow while the other rested on the small of her back. She was close enough that he gained the distinct smell of mint from her hair. Her gaze met his, wide-eyed and fearful for only a moment, before that distinct fire came back again, and she righted herself, pulling from his grasp. "Pardon me."

He couldn't help but chuckle again as they started walking once more. Somehow, being with her made him feel light, like he had no need to limp, so that even the constant pressure of his false leg was eased. "It surprises you that I would yield the position to you so readily?"

The color drained from her face as she shook her head. "No... I

mean yes... or rather, I don't know."

Why did it lighten his heart so much to see her flustered? He enjoyed it quite inordinately. He couldn't help but smile at her again. He wasn't used to this devilish attitude she brought up in him. She made him feel quite rakish. But all too soon, they reached the hotel. He glanced across the street and railroad tracks toward the livery. "Should I walk you the rest of the way?"

She jogged away from him, calling back. "No need, I can make my way from here."

He stood at the front of the hotel, watching her dash away, wishing that she would turn and look at him once more before heading inside. And at the last moment she did. She glanced his direction, and even from this distance, he could see her eyes go wide and her face redden deliciously. He couldn't remember ever feeling quite this way about a girl. She didn't show him deference or pity. She didn't try to manipulate him or even flirt with him. Her utter honesty charmed him, and he couldn't wait to see where this term might take him.

Chapter 5

The next morning, when Hannah caught sight of Oliver sitting at the desk, writing, in the hotel kitchen, her heart fluttered. She swallowed, unsure of how she should behave around him, now that she didn't quite hate him so much. When she hated him for taking her position, she knew exactly how she felt about him. But now that he'd deferred to her both in the classroom and at the carpenter's, and even said that he believed her to be a competent teacher, things had changed. His words had soothed a very sore place in her heart. It was surprising that they came from the person she thought would be her rival for the position she'd pursued for so long.

Her breath hitched when he glanced up from his writing to smile at her. He stood from his seat and gave her a bow of the head while she approached. His crooked smile made the butterflies reappear in her stomach.

"Good morning, Miss Walsh," he said, his deep voice velvety soft.

She swallowed past the lump in her throat before nodding and bobbing a curtesy. "Good morning, Mr. Holt."

"I've been outlining how best to use our time this morning. If you'd like to see and suggest changes?" He stepped aside and gestured for her to sit at the chair he'd occupied a moment before and take a look at the paper on which he'd been writing.

She took the seat and looked over the schedule he'd made. He leaned forward from behind her and pointed toward the paper, the heat of his skin a fraction of an inch from her own cheek. She held her breath, not daring to move.

"If we start with the children, already separated by age, we can forgo the unnecessary introductions. Even while they eat the morning tart Lavender wishes to provide, the older children tend to eat faster than the younger." His breath brushed against her neck as he pulled back.

A shiver went down her spine, but she suppressed it, still afraid to move. She let out a slow breath, willing her fluttering heart to stop beating against her ribs as though bars to a bird's cage. When she spoke, her voice was higher pitched than she intended, "Yes, right.

That sounds like an excellent plan."

"Excellent. The children will be here shortly. Let's go ahead and set up." He stepped to the side and offered her a hand.

She took his hand, once again marveling at its warmth, and the feeling of its roughness against hers. His hand was so much bigger than hers. It enveloped hers with warmth and made her feel as though he was strong and could protect her. He released it and then walked with her as Lavender returned from the innards of the hotel.

"Good morning to both of you. Lovely day isn't it?" Lavender asked.

Oliver met Hannah's eyes with a smile that crinkled his in the corners. "It truly is lovely."

Somehow, she had the feeling he wasn't talking about the weather, but about her. Could that be possible? Did he think her lovely? No. She must have been mistaken. She swallowed and pulled her gaze from his as she set slates in front of each of the place settings, alongside the tarts that Lavender set out. Besides, Oliver hadn't met Lydia yet. That thought turned her stomach and squeezed her heart. Even Mr. Forest had been taken with Lydia when he first came to Brokken. Every man was taken with Lydia's beauty. Even though she was engaged to be married to Fritz in the spring, men still ogled her.

Hannah's shoulders felt suddenly heavy as they drooped. Oliver would definitely change his mind when he saw Lydia. No one thought Hannah lovely once her older sister waltzed in. She sighed as the children started to arrive and hung the best smile she could muster upon her lips.



OLIVER NOTICED the sudden change in Hannah's demeanor once Lavender and the children started to arrive. Although she wasn't clearly rejecting him as she had when she felt they were battling for the same position, she no longer met his gazes, and though she immersed herself with the children, she seemed melancholy. With a sigh, he worked through his day instead. He needed to stop allowing a woman he'd barely known two days have such a hold on his heart and emotions that he let her distract him from his profession. The children needed his full attention.

And once he gave them his full attention, he noticed another of his students seemed distracted with melancholy—Missy. It was quite the turnaround from the pleasant nature she'd shown the day before. When he had a chance and got his eldest student away from the other three, he brought her by his desk. "Is anything the matter, Missy? You're not quite yourself today."

She blinked at him, her eyes becoming watery. Her bottom lip pulled into her mouth, and she chewed on it while shaking her head.

He frowned. “It’s okay, Missy. Tell me your problem. Maybe I can help.”

She swallowed hard, opened her mouth and then closed it again. She looked away, shook her head, and then finally met eyes with him again, forcing a smile. “It’s nothing you can help me with, sir. It’s all right. Things will work out in the end, I’m certain.”

Oliver didn’t like being left in the dark, but perhaps this was something that he couldn’t deal with at all. Perhaps Missy had a delicate issue. He nodded, patted her shoulder, and then allowed Missy to go back to doing her schoolwork. Though she still seemed distracted, somehow opening up to him at least that much seemed to relieve her enough that she was able to put her problems aside and get her work completed for class.

The rest of the day went on well enough, though the melancholic tension over the classroom in the kitchen made the four hours pass slowly. When Hannah returned to the teacher’s desk at the end of the day with a stack of slates, Oliver pulled her to the side. “Missy’s not quite herself today. Though she won’t reveal to me what the matter is, perhaps she will it to you.”

Hannah frowned, her eyes fixing on the girl who was lingering in the kitchen, helping Lavender clean up. “Perhaps. I’ll ask her to walk home with me again and see if we can find out.”

Relief helped relax muscles in his body that he did not know held tension. He nodded. “Thank you.”

Her brow furrowed as she peered up at him again. “Talking doesn’t always help issues, you know?”

“I like to believe that when we share our burdens with others, the load is lightened, even if the other person cannot do anything to make the burden lighter physically.”

Her frown deepened. “I’ve never thought of it that way before.”

He offered her a friendly smile. “I’d hope that if you have problems that you might have a friend who you can talk to about them and have your burden lifted. If not, I’d be happy to be your friend.”

Her cheeks colored as her eyes widened. She swallowed before darting her gaze away. “Thank you for the offer, Mr. Holt.”

And she slipped away from him again, almost running from him as she rushed toward the doorway. Before stepping out, she stopped, turned back and spoke with Missy, and then the two young women left together. For some reason the fact that Hannah kept running from him only enticed him to want to chase her. Like a dog could not help but chase a rabbit when it runs. But he had no designs on hurting the woman. In fact, he wasn’t quite certain what his designs were, except

for what he'd just offered her a moment before—friendship.

Chapter 6

Once Hannah walked with Missy toward home, she noticed what Oliver had been saying. For certain, Missy wasn't quite herself. She leaned in toward her young friend and student. "Is something the matter?"

Missy blinked up at her, wide-eyed. "How could you tell?"

"Even your smile looks like a burden to you. When you're deep in thought, you're much like me—you stuff your problem down and try to hide it behind a smile." They meandered on the walk back, taking their time, and heading toward the back of the livery where the fields for the horses' turnout stretched for several acres. The horses' tails swished as they pulled tufts of winter grass from the ground.

Missy leaned against the fence, her arms flopping over to the other side of the rail, and she rested her chin on the top board. "Sheriff Vic got a letter from my relatives back East. They said they cannot take me on as a ward at this time, and that we should look for other arrangements. They even gave the name of a Texas orphanage nearby."

Dread poured over Hannah like cold water down her back. "Your family is rejecting you? You can't live in an orphanage!"

Missy lifted her chin from the board and shook her head. "What choice do I have? I can't impose on Sheriff Vic forever, and the people of Brokken are all starting new lives with new wives or husbands. They don't have time for someone like me. And at thirteen, I'm a bit too young to marry yet either."

Hannah's breath hitched. "You've thought about this quite a bit."

"It's all I've been able to think about. I've hardly slept, and even Mr. Holt noticed that I struggled with my school work today." Her voice shook as though she was barely able to hold back tears.

Hannah's brain moved slower than her mouth. "We have an extra bed. Since Rebecca married and is building a new home with her husband Jake in the loft above the livery… and Lydia will be leaving soon to live at Brokken Arrow Ranch when she marries Fritz."

Missy yanked back and blinked at Hannah. "I couldn't ask you to do that."

“Yes, you can. It will just be me, Noah, and Mama. It will be too quiet anyway. There will be too much space. None of us are used to that. And we’ll need help, since Lydia does most of the cooking and cleaning. Those chores will fall on me, and I’m not the best at either one.” Hannah huffed a laugh, sheepishly.

“I’m great at cooking and cleaning. I had to do it all before, for me and Papa.” Missy pulled back from the fence, starting to look excited.

Hannah knew Missy’s history. Her mother had died in childbirth, and her father had been a harsh taskmaster, expecting too much from the girl at too young of an age. “I bet you are great at it. For certain, better than me.”

Missy’s eyes turned sad. “But do you think it will truly be okay. Will your Mama and Noah be all right with it? Won’t they protest to take on another mouth to feed?”

“Nonsense.” Hannah stood tall and determined. She’d never really asked for much of anything from her family. She didn’t confide in them. She didn’t ask them for support. The family had been dwindling away, starting, of course, when they lost their father and two older brothers in the War. Now her elder sisters were marrying and starting families of their own. And as each day passed, their mother seemed to fold in on herself. Perhaps inviting Missy into their family would help bring new life into their home. “Stay for tea and then I’ll talk to the Pastor about what we need to do, and he’ll help me convince the family. I’m sure of it.”

“I’d hate to impose, but I promise to help with chores as much as I possibly can.” Missy clasped her hands together in front of her, looking something other than morose for the first time that morning.

Hannah took Missy’s hands in both of hers. “In life there are things that we earn, and there is grace. Even if you can never earn back what you take, you have to show gratitude to God for providing what you don’t deserve. Don’t try to earn grace. God will provide a home for you no matter what happens.”

Missy’s eyes welled with tears. “Thank you. I’ve been praying a lot.”

“I’m not surprised to hear it.” She gave Missy’s hands a gentle squeeze before releasing them. “Now then, let’s have some tea and sandwiches.”

“Sounds delicious.”



THAT EVENING, Oliver went for a stroll through town. He’d gotten used to walking as much as he could while on campus at the University in Charlottesville, Virginia. The land in Brokken was fairly

flat in comparison to the town near the Appalachian Mountains, and it made walking without a cane that much easier for him. He'd always felt that the more he practiced, the better able to walk he'd become, and without practice, he might need to rely on a cane like he had when he'd first received his false leg.

Brokken's population was smaller than he was used to back home, and from what he'd heard, there had been a great deal of growth in the past year. He nodded greetings to those he met along the way, until one couple stopped him. The gentleman removed his hat. "Good afternoon, Mr. Holt. My son tells me that you're the most educated teacher we've had here in Brokken. He sings your praises better than he used to with ole Miss Edna."

Oliver removed his hat as well and accepted the man's hand to shake. "I'm not certain that's true. Miss Edna had been teaching on the better side of 40 years. I can only hope to have such a great influence on the generations as she has."

The man's brow tightened for a moment before relaxing. "Well, anyway, thank you for coming to Brokken. I hope you'll stay as long as Miss Edna was here, too."

"Thank you for the warm welcome."

They both dipped their heads again and then walked on, replacing their hats. Wearing a hat was another custom Oliver had been getting used to. Back in Virginia, as a student, he rarely wore one, but here in Texas, he'd be left feeling exposed without it. First, he headed north of town to peer at the beautiful lake there. He'd stayed till the sun dipped below the horizon and then walked back through town in the last vestiges of sunlight that remained before darkness fell like a curtain. As he continued back toward the hotel, he found his feet walking past it and toward the light of the blacksmith's shop. The shop shined like beacon in an otherwise fully dark part of town. The breeze carried the sound of the farrier's hammer ringing against the anvil with each swing. Inside the open shop, Jake Wheeler stood, holding a chestnut mare.

Oliver stepped just under the overhang and called in, "Hello, there."

Jake turned and smiled, waving a hand. The farrier stopped, wiping the sweat from his brow even though the air had turned a bit chilly, and waved as well, his deep baritone saying, "Ah! If it isn't the teacher. I don't believe we've met yet. I'm Peter York."

"Oliver Holt." He took the man's offered hand and shook it. The blacksmith was a bear of a man, the definition of brawny. His exposed arms glistened from the light of his lamps and the fire of the coal forge nearby. His hands were rough from hard work, making Oliver feel smaller than usual. "Do you have any children in school?"

The man laughed and shook his head. “Getting on near thirty-two and haven’t been married yet. Seems like every girl who catches my eye is either married or fixin’ to be.”

Oliver nodded. Though he’d not had that problem yet. At only twenty-two, Oliver had met plenty of girls in his home town, but none of them tugged on his heartstrings. He’d just not had much interest in feminine wiles. Maybe that’s what he’d liked so much about Hannah. Feminine she was, but she seemed to lack the usual supply of wiles.

The three men fell into comfortable conversation for a short bit while Peter finished tacking on the last shoe on the mare’s hoof. Once he’d finished the task, he stood, stretched his back and begin returning his tools to their usual places. Jake held the chestnut’s lead rope and turned toward Oliver. “Have you eaten yet, Teacher? I’m about to head back to the livery with this one and then stop in the main house for supper. The Walsh family has heard a great deal about you but haven’t yet met you in entirety. I’m sure they’d like to put a face with the name.”

“That’s a generous offer, Mr. Wheeler. Are you certain I won’t be imposing? It’s getting late, and they’ve had no notice of company arriving.” Oliver walked alongside Jake while he returned to the livery stable, not much more than fifty paces away.

Once Jake had returned the mare to her stall in the livery, he led Oliver toward the house, just as Hannah and Missy were stepping out onto the back porch. Hannah’s step faltered as soon as she met eyes with Oliver. Oliver’s heart skipped a beat to see her with her hair down instead of pinned up as it normally was. Soft curls framed her cherub cheeks in the light of the gas lamps.

“What are you doing here?” She blinked and blushed at the harshness of her words. “I mean, lovely to see you, Mr. Holt. Is there something the matter?”

Missy peered between both Oliver and Hannah, but Oliver was happy to see she appeared to be in better spirits than when last he saw her.

Oliver removed his hat and bowed slightly. “Actually, Mr. Wheeler has just invited me to dinner. I hope you and your family don’t mind the imposition.”

She gasped, the color draining from her face as she shook her head quickly. “You can’t!”

Chapter 7

Hannah's heart sank. She swallowed. No. She wasn't ready for Oliver to meet Lydia. Hannah wasn't ready for how her heart was going to break when he saw her. Maybe after Lydia got married. Maybe then, but no, not now.

"What do you mean?" Jake frowned.

What was she doing? How could she be so rude? "Um. I beg your pardon. I just mean it's not the best time for us to receive company. Much of the family has already eaten. My mother wasn't feeling well and had just said she was going to bed. I didn't mean to be rude. I just believe it would be best if you came another day, that's all."

Oliver's expression went from one of confusion to one of understanding as he nodded and offered her that crooked smile. "You're right. I'd much rather not come unannounced. But you do promise to invite me over and soon?"

Lydia's lilting voice grew closer to the door, and panic struck Hannah as she rushed forward.

She lightly touched his arm. "Yes, I promise, but it's gotten later than I realized, Mr. Holt. Would you mind escorting Missy and me to the sheriff's office?"

She didn't stop to wait for an answer but passed by him, hoping it would turn him around. She fully expected him to acquiesce to her request since he was very much a gentleman, and what gentleman would deny escorting women in the dark?

"Of course," he said and fell in step beside her.

Jake called out after them, "I'm sorry, Mr. Holt. I hope to see you soon for supper."

"Thank you for the offer, anyway. And I hope so as well," Oliver called back.

A light breeze blew, and overhead, the clouds hung low, reflecting the light of the gas lamps that lit up the town with an orange hue. Hannah's heart still fluttered in her chest. Why did she feel it would break if Oliver liked Lydia? All men liked Lydia. Even Jake had seemed taken with Lydia, at least for a short while, before Rebecca managed to steal his heart. But that was strong, capable Rebecca.

Could Hannah manage to steal the heart of a man from Lydia? She almost huffed a laugh at the thought. Ridiculous. And then her throat squeezed as she suddenly wanted to cry. Why would any man choose her? She shivered.

"Are you cold, Miss Walsh? Should we turn back?" Oliver asked, his brow furrowed with worry.

"Oh, no. I'm just fine. The breeze just caught me off-guard. It's not too far to the sheriff's office, anyway." She pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders.

It was because of the way Oliver looked at Hannah now. That was the reason she didn't want him to look at Lydia. He looked at Hannah as though he cared about her. He cared whether she was hot or cold. He cared what she thought about the desks and the plans for the day at school. He listened to her and smiled at her. He made her feel something that she hadn't dare to feel for any other man. And she didn't want it to end. She didn't want him to look at Lydia in the same way. Because then, she feared, he wouldn't look at Hannah that way again.

"This is it," Missy said, pulling Hannah from her thoughts. "I'll talk to Sheriff Vic tonight about moving my things tomorrow. Thank you so much, Miss Walsh. I can't ever thank you enough."

Hannah smiled at Missy. "Don't thank me at all. It's honestly no trouble. You're doing us all a favor as well."

Missy smiled wider and then headed inside the sheriff's office. The girl's smile gave Hannah a warm feeling. She wanted Missy to feel at home in her house and not like a stranger. She wanted her to feel welcome and not as though she needed to repay anything. Hannah hoped that Missy would learn to feel that way in time.

"It looks as though you figured out what put our student in melancholy and fixed it. How did you manage that?" Oliver's deep voice was behind her, and Hannah shivered again, suddenly realizing they were alone.

She turned around slowly and brushed her gaze over his. "Her family back east rejected her. She was going to have to live in an orphanage if someone from town wasn't willing to take her on."

His smile widened, and that dimple appeared in his cheek. "Your family has opened their doors to her?"

She nodded as they started the walk back toward the livery. "Of course. Missy is a lovely, polite young lady. She's never been any trouble and always works hard. And my family is dwindling, so it will be nice to have her company."

"Dwindling?"

"My sister Rebecca and Jake will soon have a family of their own in their own house. Rebecca just told us tonight she's expecting."

He huffed a laugh. “That’s excellent news. I thought I saw an extra shine in Jake’s eye tonight that wasn’t there when last I saw him.”

Hannah nodded. “They only just found out today after talking to Miss Abby, the doctor… the doctor’s wife.”

“Then it seems your family is growing, not dwindling. I’m certain Jake and Rebecca will visit often with their new child.” Oliver said with a smile.

Hannah shook her head. “It’s more than that. I mean that Rebecca isn’t always there like she used to be. And then Lydia’s also getting married, too.”

“Lydia?”

Heat rushed to Hannah’s cheeks. Why had she even mentioned her? “My other sister. She’s marrying Fritz Brokken come spring. So, then Noah and I will be the only ones in the house to take care of Mama.”

Slowly he nodded. “I see what you mean now by dwindling. Even though all your family will still be in town, it will feel more like an empty house than it ever has before for you and your brother and mother.”

“Precisely.”

“And if you or your brother should marry, it will be that much emptier.”

She frowned and shook her head. “Noah won’t marry any time soon. He’s a bit young. And none of the men have shown any interest in me—it’s why I was best candidate for schoolteacher, since I’d be unmarried.”

He lifted a brow. “I wouldn’t say that.”

She blinked up at him. “Say what?”

“I’ve seen a few men in town eye you as you walk by. It wouldn’t surprise me if you were married before long.”

She scoffed as they reached the hotel. “I doubt that very seriously.”

He inclined her head toward her. “Don’t doubt it too seriously, Hannah. I know of at least one man in town who may have designs on your heart.”

She wanted to ask who or scoff again, but his eyes smoldered when she met his gaze, and her breath caught in her throat. Did he mean himself? Surely not. He reached forward and pushed a stray lock away from her face, his fingertips light as a feather against the skin of her forehead. The heat of his touch lingered long after he pulled his hand away. Finally, she swallowed, her heart thundering in her chest. He leaned toward her slightly, and for a moment she wondered if he might kiss her. They’d only known each other two days. Would he really be so forward?

“Goodnight,” she called as she spun on her heel and dashed across

the street toward the livery, alone.

His voice called after her, tinged with the slightest bit of mirth. “Goodnight, Miss Walsh.”

Was he making fun of her? Anger welled up within her stomach, heating as if coals of fire sat inside her chest. He was making sport of her. It was the only thing that made any sense. Maybe he didn’t mean anything he’d said to her at all the last two days. Maybe he’d lulled her into a false sense of security so that he could then yank the position of teacher out from under her when she wouldn’t be able to protest it so readily.

Oliver was smart. He was craftier than Hannah could ever be. She’d been a fool to believe that he cared. She swiped the tears from her eyes as she reached the back door. The last thing she needed was for anyone to ask her why she was upset. After plastering on a subtle smile, she opened the door and headed inside, making the decision that she’d not let Mr. Oliver Holt make a fool of her again.

Chapter 8

Over the next few days, Oliver couldn't help but notice the change in Hannah's attitude toward him. She'd become cold again, but not a hateful kind of cold. This time, the cold was indifference. He shouldn't have tried to kiss her. What was he thinking when he'd followed his heart in that moment? This sudden chill from Hannah had to be her way of rejecting his advances. He'd acted a fool and deserved it. He'd pushed her much too fast. Even though her doe eyes had seemed to say they had feelings for him, too, she barely looked at him now.

So, he gave her space for a few days. Then on Friday, when class let out, he approached her with a smile. "Miss Walsh, I hope that you have a lovely weekend."

She blinked up at him, her softened features gaining a bit of hardness around the edges before she looked back down at the slates she washed. "You, too, Mr. Holt."

"I was wondering what I might do over the weekend. I thought that perhaps someone who'd promised to ask me to supper might decide to do so." He wanted to be subtle with his prodding, but knew he was being about as subtle as a copperhead snake.

Her shoulders stiffened for a moment, and she hesitated on the slate she was cleaning, but she didn't look up and continued cleaning. "Hopefully someone might."

He lifted a brow at her. She refused to take the bait. His jaw tensed a bit while this feeling between them squeezed at his heart. He let out a breath slowly. "Perhaps I'll run into Jake Wheeler again, and he'll invite me."

Her eyes suddenly met his, widened. She shook her head. "No need. Let me talk to my mother and see if you can come Sunday afternoon after church."

"That would be lovely. Let's make it a date." A smile tugged at one side of his lip. He wasn't certain why Hannah didn't want to have him over at her house, but now he knew it wasn't entirely about the undesired advances he'd made toward her. Something else bothered her and kept her from wanting to invite him over. But no matter, he was proud of himself for manipulating the situation.

He winced as he walked away from her and returned to the desk to get his belongings. The one thing he hated about the women in his past was their power of manipulation—of doing exactly what he'd just done. He didn't want to manipulate Hannah, but he needed to have her acknowledge him, even if she was flatly rejecting his advances. He wanted her to either tell him plainly she wasn't interested, or to give him a chance to redeem himself. He hoped she would give him a try.



"LYDIA, didn't you say that you wanted to make time to spend with Fritz soon, but felt you had too much to do?" Hannah asked as she sat at the dinner table that evening.

With a fork lifted partway to her mouth, Lydia stopped and nodded. "Yes."

Hannah swirled around the stew on her plate. "Well, I was thinking that if it would help you, I could make supper on Sunday afternoon and give you the chance to spend time with him and possibly even make him supper at the Brokken Arrow Ranch.

A light sparkled in her sister's eyes. "Do you mean it?"

Hannah nodded.

"I'll be happy to help, too!" Missy cried from across the table. She'd been an enormous help to Lydia already and often got up early to do chores that Lydia had put off to the next day. Hannah wanted to tell her that it was okay, that she didn't need to help her make dinner, but Hannah knew that things would go better if she just accepted Missy's offer.

Hannah nodded over to her new sister. "Thank you. You would be an enormous help."

Missy smiled and continued to eat her stew. Occasionally, Hannah saw Noah peering at Missy and turning away, his cheeks reddened. It was only then she wondered if her brother might be developing feelings for their ward.

"Since I'm making dinner, Mama, is there anything in particular you'd like me to make?" She turned toward her mother who still sat at the head of the table in her father's old seat.

Her mother met eyes with her. "Anything you want to make would be lovely, Hannah Beth, but if you don't mind making collards? I do have a hankering for some greens."

"I can do that, Mama," Lydia said suddenly. "Tomorrow if you want."

Mama set her hand on top of Lydia's. "No dear. Let Hannah Beth do it. Somehow, she makes greens just like my mother used to. You'll have to get her to show you how she does it someday."

Lydia scrunched her nose. “I already know her secret, Mama. She likes to use too much lard and adds a bit of brown sugar.”

Her mother huffed a laugh. “If you know, child, why don’t you do it that way?”

Lydia rolled her eyes slightly in an exaggerated blink. “Because it takes away the healthy purpose behind eating the collards in the first place.”

Her mother’s hand fluttered over her chest. “Yes, well, at least let Hannah make them on Sunday. Don’t you worry about it. I may not approve of you marrying Fritz, but I guess I can’t stop you from spending time with him.”

Lydia’s lips tightened in a thin line. “Fine, Mama.”

“Mama,” Hannah started in again. “Since I’m making supper on Sunday, may I invite a guest to come?”

“A guest?” Lydia suddenly sat up straighter. “Who is it that you are going through the trouble of cooking for?”

Hannah shook her head vigorously. “It’s not that I want to cook for him. I’m only trying to help relieve your burden for the day, Lydia, so you can make other plans.”

“Him? You’re cooking for a man?” Lydia leaned in and whispered loudly, “Do you have a gentleman caller?”

Heat rushed to Hannah’s cheeks at her sister’s tease. “I do not! It’s Mr. Holt, the other school teacher.”

Lydia lifted a brow. “I thought the two of you were rivals for the same position. Why ever would you want to invite him here if you are enemies?”

“We’re not enemies.” Hannah put her spoon down and shook her head vigorously. “I just thought it would be nice for him to get a homecooked meal.”

“Isn’t he at the hotel?” Lydia scoffed. “I’m sure Lavender is better at making home cooked meals than you are.”

Hannah’s jaw clicked as her teeth clacked together. She tensed. Why was Lydia making her plan so hard? She glared at her sister.

Lydia rolled her eyes. “Fine. Thank you for the offer of cooking supper on Sunday. I do want to spend some time with Fritz that afternoon.”

“And, yes, Hannah Beth, your gentleman caller can come by for supper,” her mother said around a mouthful of stew. Noah chuckled.

Heat flushed her cheeks again. “He’s not a gentleman caller, Mama.”

Her mother waved a hand. “Whatever he is, it’s fine for him to come by Sunday for supper.”

Hannah let out a slow breath and picked back up her spoon. At least this way, she could get Lydia out of the house while Oliver

visited. That was the only thing she wanted. The heat slowly left her cheeks as she finished her plate, wondering what she might make for supper on Sunday to please him.



SUNDAY, at church, Oliver sat with Mayor Mathew and his family while listening to the sermon. Occasionally he found his gaze wandering over toward the Walsh family. Hannah and Missy sat with Jake Wheeler and his wife, one of Hannah's sisters. Their mother sat with the younger brother, Noah, and another of Hannah's sisters, the one who was engaged to Fritz Brokken. Hannah had already mentioned to Oliver about the invitation to come for supper later that evening after church, and he could feel his stomach twist with excitement. He wanted to see if he might get the chance to speak to the family during the bit of fellowship after the service as well. Hannah's profile flashed to him on occasion, and he couldn't help but have his heart race each time in hopes she might glance back toward him—which she didn't. And part of Oliver's conscience pricked at him for having such scandalous thoughts during the pastor's sermon.

It had been several years since he'd felt this way about a girl, since before he'd lost his leg in the war. Before he'd even heard there was a war to run off to. Even then, the girls he'd had interest in had been little more than schoolboy fancies. Women weren't trustworthy—at least no woman in his past had ever been. They'd pretend to like him to get what they wanted. His mother often lied to his father. He'd yet to have a woman in his life not betray him. What made matters worse was the way they'd all do it behind a smile—a mask of beauty to hide the ugliness underneath. And then there was Hannah. Her every thought, every feeling was as plain as the expression on her face.

He let out a slow breath as the congregation stood for the last hymn. He strained to see if he could make out Hannah's voice among the others, but the off-key, overloud singing of one of her sisters overpowered any other singing he attempted to fix his ear upon. The gaudy woman smiled proudly, as though she were the best among the singers in the congregation, but instead she only puffed herself up like a cock, strutting around the hens. Oliver's jaw tensed. He hated that he thought that way about one of Hannah's sisters, but she was exactly the kind of woman he avoided, and completely contrary to Hannah.

Unfortunately, the moment the song ended, Hannah and Missy ducked out of the rectory before Oliver could make it to the end of the pew. So many of the townspeople wanted to have a word with Mathew, and they blocked the only way Oliver could get past and try

to catch her before she left. He let out a long sigh, but it quickly turned to a smile as Jake Wheeler spotted him and headed over his direction with Hannah's family alongside him. They slid down the pew in front of Oliver to avoid the mayor and his constituents.

Jake offered Oliver a hand to shake as soon as he drew near enough. "Mr. Holt, I'd like to introduce you to my wife. This is Rebecca."

The pleasant woman bobbed her head and offered a hand toward him. He shook it. "A pleasure, Mrs. Wheeler."

Jake smiled and gestured to the others. "This young man is Noah Walsh, my brother-in-law. Their sister, Lydia, and of course my beautiful mother-in-law, Ora Walsh."

"It's so wonderful to meet you all. I've been hoping to have met with you sooner, but the activities with the children..." Oliver started.

"I hear my sister, Hannah Beth, has invited you for dinner. She's making it special, herself," the gaudy one, Lydia, said, hiding her sneer with a demure smile.

He fought a frown at her demeanor, which wasn't hard since the news she offered him made his heart soar. "She is?"

"She doesn't cook often," said Noah. "But she's a good cook when she does."

"It's not often she gets a gentleman caller, either," the elder Mrs. Walsh said, studying him with a lifted brow.

Heat rushed to his cheeks. He cleared his throat but was unable to confirm nor deny the woman's statement. In truth, he supposed he was a gentleman caller, but he didn't think that Hannah would think that of him. At least not yet. Finally, he said, "I'm sure whatever Hannah makes, it will be delicious."

The gaudy sister giggled behind her hand. He didn't know how much of her presence he would be able to take. He supposed he'd have to swallow the bitter medicine with a spoonful of sugar. He'd need to get used to Lydia's presence at least on occasion if he'd be joining the Walsh family.

What was he thinking?

Did he have designs on marrying Hannah? He hadn't thought that far ahead yet, only that he wanted to win her heart. But to what end? He hadn't considered it. But now that he did, he supposed that marriage was the logical step. It would solve many of their problems and keep him from having to move back east at the end of the semester. Now, how would he convince Hannah?

Chapter 9

Though supper had been a tense occasion at first for Hannah, Oliver actually got on well with her family and made her fall into a comfortable conversation along with the rest of them. It had been the right move to make sure Lydia wasn't there, so that Hannah didn't have to deal with Oliver falling for her older sister, and also because Lydia had a way of dominating the discussion and would have likely steered the course back to her favorite topic of late—the wedding.

Even Mama had laughed and enjoyed their time together, and because it was just Hannah, Missy, Noah, Mama, and Oliver, Hannah began to imagine that life wouldn't be so bad, wouldn't be so lonely, even after Jake and Rebecca rarely came by or when Lydia finally moved to the Broken Arrow Ranch.

After they'd sat for a long while over their empty bowls of cobbler, Oliver finally stood. "Thank you all for an absolutely wonderful supper. Hannah truly is an excellent cook and will make a fine wife."

Heat rushed to Hannah's cheeks and her gaze darted from him. She swallowed. Not that marriage was likely to happen for her, but for Oliver to say it, himself, made her feel a bit lightheaded. Hannah and Missy both stood to collect the bowls when Missy rested a hand on top of Hannah's. "I can start cleaning up. Don't worry about it, Miss Walsh. You have company."

Hannah started to protest with a shake of her head.

"I'll help her, Hannah Beth." Noah stood and rushed into the kitchen area with Missy, leaving Hannah just blinking after him.

Mama stood, moving toward her rocker and her quilt. "They're right, Hannah Beth. See to your company."

Hannah began to feel even more flushed at everyone pushing her toward Oliver. She wasn't sure how to do what they said, but she followed him toward the door. They stepped out onto the back porch together, and she shut the door behind her. A cool breeze had picked up when the sun went down. Across the way, a light shone in the upstairs of the livery, where Jake and Rebecca had made their own space a short distance from the family. When Hannah reached the bottom step, she pulled her shawl tighter around her and peered up at

the stars.

"There's something about looking up at the sky and seeing familiar constellations, like Orion. It helps me remember that no matter where I travel, there are things that remain the same." Oliver stood next to her, pointing toward the same constellation where she'd been looking.

She nodded. "Have you traveled much?"

"Mostly I've just stayed in Virginia and Maryland. This is the farthest from my hometown of Richmond that I've ever been. But when I'd sat in the trenches of war, those few short months, it had felt like a different world entirely." His voice was wistful and a little melancholic.

Hannah could hardly imagine. She didn't really want to imagine. The two brothers she'd said goodbye to... and their father... never returned from the war. In some ways, she'd been jealous that Deborah Brokken's brothers had all made it back, but she admonished herself. Deborah had lost her father, too. And at least Hannah had her sisters and Noah and Mama. She pulled her gaze from the sky and landed upon Oliver, who looked at her with a heated expression she didn't recognize. Her eyes went wide before she blinked and yanked her gaze from his.

He cleared his throat. "You truly are a lovely cook, and I think you for inviting me over and cooking for me. I hope you might consider doing it again."

Her heart fluttered in her chest as she looked back up to see if he was just being kind. His smile told her that it was more than that... at least she hoped it did. "I'd like to."

"Tomorrow, the children will be starting their last week of classes at the hotel. Jake said something about the desks being complete by the end of the week and the town having a school raising party next weekend."

A wide smile played on her lips as she thought about how the children were going to get their school back. "That's right."

"You look lovely when you smile. You should do that more often." His husky voice and his words set her heart aflame in her chest.

Even the cool breeze did nothing to quench the heat in her face. She wanted to believe his words, but she still feared that he just toyed with her feelings because he had another agenda. Everything in her wished his words were true, wished she could take them as they were spoken, but could she?

"Hannah Beth!" Lydia cried out, making Hannah jump from her position immediately next to Oliver.

Hannah's heart sank and her stomach twisted. No. Lydia wasn't supposed to come home yet. Why was she here? Then Hannah saw the distraught look in Lydia's eyes and the way tears streamed down her

sister's face and felt guilty for her selfishness. "Lydia? What's the matter?"

Lydia wailed and threw herself at Hannah, forcing Hannah to hold her sister's weight while she cried. Oliver met eyes with Hannah over her sister's form. He blinked. "Is everything all right? Is there anything I can do?"

His eyes never left Hannah's for more than a moment. They brushed over Lydia but didn't linger the way Hannah had seen other men's gazes do. Lydia pulled back, barely looking Oliver's direction while she wailed again. "It's Fritz. He claims he's in love… with another woman," she said between sobs. "He's called the wedding off."

Then she collapsed into Hannah's arms again. Oliver's eyes went wide. "Forgive me. This seems like a family matter. I should go."

Hannah nodded to him. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Yes," he said as he stepped away, looking reluctant to go. "In the morning."

Hannah rubbed her sister's back while she continued to wail and sob, her cries loud enough, that Rebecca came down from the hayloft in the livery, a shawl pulled over her night clothes. "What's going on?"

"Becca!" Lydia pulled away and rushed toward the eldest sister, collapsing in Rebecca's arms.

With hands clasped in front of her, Hannah stood, not knowing what she should do to help her sister. Rebecca made cooing sounds while rubbing Lydia's back, trying to tell her everything was going to be all right. For a long while, the three of them stood, just like that, as the full moon waded higher into the sky. When Lydia finally settled and pulled back, she collapsed on the second step of the porch. Her red-rimmed eyes shined in the faded light. "He broke my heart again. I didn't think he'd do it a third time. I thought he'd never leave me again. But he left me... and for another woman. He wouldn't even tell me who she is."

Fresh sobs racked her body while she buried her face in her hands. Rebecca sat next to her on one side of the step while Hannah sat on the other. Jake showed up, looking roughly like he'd just woken up. He peered their direction, saw the state Lydia was in, and stopped several yards away. Rebecca gestured toward him with her hands, and he left, returning to their hay loft. Lydia continued to cry while the sisters sat with her silently. They waited again until Lydia raised her face once more.

"How could he do it? How? I thought we were in love. I thought we'd finally be happy. How could I be so wrong?"

Rebecca set a hand on Lydia's knee. "Sometimes we can be blind to

the problems in our relationships because we see only what we want to see."

Lydia shook her head. "I've been such a fool."

Hannah also set a hand on her other knee. "You've never been a fool. You've always been loyal to a fault—that doesn't make you a fool. He made you wait for him, and each time, you did. Your heart is pure, and you were loyal. Those are good things, not bad."

"But I feel so stupid. I shouldn't have waited. He never asked me to. I should have known better if he never asked. I did things for my own selfish reasons. I just didn't want to let go." Tears slipped from the corners of her eyes.

"Don't hold tight to regret. These things aren't your fault. Fritz shouldn't have strung you along like he did. If he had another woman, he should have said so instead of asking him to marry you." Rebecca's hands fisted as she showed a bit of her anger.

Lydia's eyes went wide. "I guess... I guess he never really did quite ask me to marry him. I think I jumped ahead and assumed we would get married. I think I started to make plans, and he never stopped me, so I thought he agreed with me. But all along, he was just being kind. He let me run ahead stupidly because he didn't want to hurt me."

"Absolutely not." Rebecca's voice took on a chastising tone. "This isn't kindness. Letting you get your hopes up more, letting you believe a falsehood isn't kindness at all. It's cruelty."

Hannah nodded, but her lips remained tightly sealed. Isn't that what she was afraid of doing with Oliver. She didn't want to hope she saw something that wasn't there. She didn't want to think he meant something he didn't mean. She didn't want to run ahead of herself and think that Oliver was being anything more than kind to her. In Hannah's situation, she knew that the cruelty she'd suffer would be self-inflicted, not Oliver's fault. But in this case, she agreed with Rebecca, it was all Fritz's fault. And they were all mad about it.

"Fritz is a cad. He should never have let you believe a falsehood," Rebecca said firmly.

Hannah nodded. "You deserve better than a gibfaced hornswoggler like him."

"Hannah Beth!" Lydia gasped, and then she laughed. "I've never heard you use such language before."

It was good to see her sister smile, but Hannah covered her mouth and blushed. Then she said behind her hand, "Well, it's true, isn't it?"

The three of them fell into a fit of giggles. It wasn't long before they began to feel the years strip away from them, and they went inside together to drink a cup of warmed milk to make themselves feel better, like they used to. Then, when Rebecca returned to the livery loft, Hannah and Lydia shared a bed together for comfort and warmth,

while Missy continued to sleep on her pallet. For the first time in several months, Hannah felt as though she had her sisters returned to her. Her family felt more whole.

Chapter 10

The week went by quickly. Oliver watched Hannah grow more into herself than she'd been the first day he'd met her. She had become a confident teacher, and the children loved her. She smiled more as she went about the work, and each time her eyes met his, his heartbeat stuttered. He couldn't fool himself any longer. His feelings for Hannah had become deep and undeniable. He looked forward to seeing her every day and tried to find reasons for them to linger together after the children were gone.

On Friday, the children left with excitement and a new treat. Lavender had made them an additional tart to take home with them, since it was their last day in the kitchen of the hotel. They'd be at their desks in the newly-built school on Monday. Once the last child had left, he stood next to Hannah. "Would you mind helping carry the slates to the school ground? I have an outdoor storage trunk we can keep them in and get them out of Lavender's way now instead of her waiting until the building party is over."

Hannah looked up at him, her ready, relaxed smile gracing her face. "That sounds lovely—if you're sure you can spare the trunk?"

His heart raced again at her nearness. "Of course."

In fact, he'd already had it ready in the lobby of the hotel, waiting for him since the morning. Mrs. Sophie had given him permission. Together, they each grabbed a handle of the light, but too large to carry alone, trunk, and walked the mile to the school. Once there, they surveyed the foundation which still remained of the old building, and the materials strewn about, waiting for the building to start the next morning. Oliver ran a hand through his dark hair. "How many people do you think will come?"

Hannah tilted her head, brows furrowed. "Everybody will come. Brokken is a very supportive town, and the school is a place that is necessary for all the citizens, even if they don't have children yet."

A bead of sweat had made its way down his temple, and he swiped at it with the sleeve of his jacket. He hated having Hannah take the other side of the trunk, but she had insisted. It wasn't unusual for Hannah to press forward and do those things that some ladies would

refuse to do. It wouldn't surprise him if, in the morning, she took hold of a hammer and helped the men with building the schoolhouse as well. The thought of it brought a smile to his lips. "Back east, people don't quite come together as readily to help one another with things like this. Usually you have to hire builders and pay them wages for their work."

"Brokken is a small town. We would never be able to budget paying a work crew. But if everyone pitches in, the work is diminished for each person. And we make it into a festival of sorts, a celebration with games for the children, and the women bring bushels of food. You'll see." Hannah stood with pride, her face practically glowing.

Oliver stood right next to her again. It wouldn't take much for him to pull her into his arms and kiss her. He shivered at the thought, every muscle in his body tensing with anticipation, but he held back. She'd responded poorly when he'd nearly kissed her before. And he still didn't know how she might feel about him. He didn't want to push her. He'd been close to asking her if she would let him court her when her sister had shown up full of tears the week before, after Sunday dinner. He only wondered briefly how Lydia was doing, but he didn't care quite enough for the girl to ask. It only mattered to him as much as it affected Hannah, and her mood had been nothing if not cheery since that night, so he pushed it out of his mind. If her father was alive, he'd ask him for her hand. He intended to ask her mother. Suddenly, Hannah met eyes with him, and he realized he'd been staring.

Still smiling, she lifted a brow. "What are you thinking so hard about?"

"Would you allow me to court you?" he blurted. Patience had never been one of his virtues.

Her eyes went wide, and her smile slipped from her face. She blinked at him and then narrowed her eyes as though doubting his honesty. "What is your aim?"

"My aim?" He tilted his head, confused for a moment. Then he swallowed before saying, "I wish to marry you, Hannah Beth Walsh."

Her eyes went wide again. "Marry me?" Her voice barely came out more than a whisper.

"If you'll have me." And suddenly, all of Oliver's confidence left him. He didn't know what kind of reaction he'd get from Hannah, but he'd hoped it would have been more positive. He'd wanted her to say yes, but the doubt in her eyes as they searched his made him feel, for the first time, that she might deny him. "I'm in love with you Hannah, and I want to court you with the purpose of marriage. I'll ask your mother for permission. Your brother, too, since he's man of the house. I'll do whatever you want from me if only you'll say yes."

He rambled and said more than he'd meant to. He'd expressed his genuine feelings and let them spill from his lips, holding nothing back. He wanted to reach out and pull her into his arms, but instead, his hands remained in fists at his sides, his fingernails digging into the palms of his hands.

"I... I don't know. This is very sudden," she finally stammered.

"I'm sorry that it's sudden, but it's the truth. I want nothing in this world more than for you to marry me."

Her brows furrowed. "You honestly feel this way... about me?"

He huffed a laugh. "I've never felt this way about any other lady I've met in my life. Only you."

She staggered, and for a moment, Oliver thought she might faint. He reached out for her, but she stepped away from him. "I'm going to need a moment to think about this. All right?"

And without another word, she ran away from him. Again.



HANNAH RAN BLINDLY INTO TOWN. As she stepped onto the boardwalk in front of the general store, she misplaced her step and twisted her ankle. She stumbled and cried out. Mr. Emmet Forest stepped out of the store. His worried eyes met hers. "Miss Walsh! Are you all right?"

She shook her head, forced a smile, and said, "I'm fine. I just twisted my ankle a little. It will be all right."

But when she attempted to walk forward, pain shot up her leg, and she nearly stumbled again. Emmet's hands where on her shoulders, but she pulled free of them, suddenly hyper aware of a man's touch.

"I'm okay. It's just a minor thing. I'll go see the doctor." And she began limping toward the doctor's house.

Emmet followed. "I could carry you. Or you can lean on me. I'd hate to leave a woman to limp all the way to the doctor."

"It's fine," she answered, but then hands lifted her up without preamble, and she resisted the touch—shocked that Emmet would do such a thing. But when she met eyes with the man who held her in his arms, she found Oliver's dark eyes staring into hers.

Her breath hitched, and every thought of resistance she had fled.

Chapter 11

Oliver's musky scent surrounded Hannah as he carried her to the doctor's house. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his limp became more pronounced, but she dared not say a word when she saw the determination in his brown eyes. She gripped his shoulders lightly, the tension in her body giving way to his warmth. He made her feel safe. He made her feel smart. He'd always made her feel like his equal. And now he'd said he loved her.

And she loved him. She'd been afraid to feel that way about him. Afraid he'd reject her. Afraid that he'd play with her emotions. But he'd said that he loved her first—said he wanted to marry her. It was okay to return the feelings, wasn't it? She didn't realize she was crying until the tears slipped past her chin. She swiped at them.

His eyes grew wider. "Are you in pain?"

"I'm fine," she said, shaking her head.

He frowned as if he didn't know if she told the truth. The afternoon sunlight gave way to shadow and a roof overhead as he slipped into a building. Hannah immediately recognized the bar to the side.

"Hannah! What's wrong?" Abby's voice was higher in tone than usual, panicked.

Oliver set Hannah down gently, and she stood, putting as little weight as she could on her twisted ankle. It throbbed as it had already begun to swell. He swiped at his sweat with his hand. "She's hurt her ankle."

Abby grabbed her by the elbow and guided her to the sofa. "Have a seat and let me take a look."

After lifting the ankle and setting it in her lap, Abby palpated the joint, forcing a wince occasionally out of Hannah, but Hannah bit her lip to keep from crying out. All the while, her eyes remained fixed on Oliver. She'd never seen him look so distraught. He wrung his hands and the wrinkles on his brow furrowed deeper than she'd seen them yet. His pale skin shined under a sheen of sweat. "Is it broken? Is she going to be okay?"

Finally, after a while, Abby looked up. "She will be fine—it's not

broken. She will just need to rest it for a while, and chew willow bark whenever the pain gets too great. It will only be a week or so before she's back to normal. I'll get a mud pack for it now. Wait here."

Oliver closed his eyes and sighed with relief while Abby left the room to get the medicine she needed. The lines on his face smoothed. Was he really that concerned for Hannah? She fixed on him until he opened his eyes again and met gazes with her. He blinked and ran a hand through his hair, disheveling it. "I'm so sorry. This was all my fault. I was impatient. I should have waited."

She shook her head at him and offered a self-deprecating smile. "No, it's not your fault. I shouldn't have run away. I just needed time to think and felt panicked."

"That's why it's my fault." He dropped down to his knees in front of the sofa where she sat. "You didn't need to feel that way. I should have—"

She took hold of his hand and cut him off with a whisper. "I love you, too."

His eyes widened and his jaw dropped as he stopped mid-sentence. She smiled at him, and the action woke him from his stupor, pulling his lips into a smile, too. He squeezed her hands, leaned forward and brushed his lips lightly against hers.

Her heart leapt and beat against her chest wildly. Heat rose to her cheeks and her whole body flushed with warmth.

His watery eyes fixed on hers. "I didn't think I'd ever hear you say that. I hoped, but didn't expect—"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I didn't think *you*'d ever say it. So, when you did, it took me by surprise. I had told myself that I was foolish for having feelings for you—that I needed to be satisfied with being a spinster and a teacher for the children in Brokken. I didn't think I'd ever get married, especially not to someone as handsome and smart and kind as you."

His smile widened. "You are all those things and more."

Then he leaned in again, his hand reaching up and taking hold of her chin lightly before kissing her again. This time he lingered, the softness giving way to a little more force, a little more desperation. It wasn't as chaste as she'd ever seen a kiss before, and it forced a surprised gasp out of her.

"Ahem." Abby cleared her throat from over Hannah's shoulder, causing them both to pull back quickly.

Hannah's cheeks heated impossibly more, and she couldn't meet gazes with Oliver for a moment while he stood. Abby's wry smile took his place as she sat before the sofa and applied the poultice to Hannah's ankle. Once she'd finished, she wrapped it in a cloth. "I'll tell Rebecca how to care for this sprain. It's not much different than

the way we care for a horse's leg. She'll be able to reapply the mud pack two or three times a day for the next few days."

"Thank you, Abby," Hannah said with relief.

"Should I help you with getting home or will you be able to lean on Mr. Holt?" she asked as she stood and dusted off her skirt.

"Would it be better if I carried her?"

"No need!" Hannah said as she stood up from the sofa quickly, holding the arm of the seat. "I think I can walk."

But when she tried to put weight on her injured leg, pain shot up even more sharply than before, causing her to wince and suck in a breath. Oliver bolted forward and wrapped her in his arms. "Let me carry you."

She shook her head. "No, just let me lean on you. It's not too far to the house."

Abby's eyebrows remained raised as she smiled a goodbye to Hannah. Hannah leaned on Oliver as he kept an arm around her shoulders and helped her walk the way home. Lydia saw them as she was returning from the general store. "Hannah Beth! What's happened?"

Oliver shook his head. "She's twisted her ankle. It's not broken but she needs to rest."

Lydia eyed the two of them, narrowing her eyes at Oliver. "Hannah Beth? You can lean on me. I'll take you home, so you don't have to rely on Mr. Holt."

Hannah's arm wrapped around Oliver's waist, causing Lydia's eyebrows to shoot up. Hannah shook her head. "It's okay. I don't mind."

Her cheeks heated again. It was true. She didn't mind. She more than didn't mind. She preferred his warmth and knew she was going to be in trouble when she got home and had to let him go. Lydia walked with them as they limped together through town. Eyes of the townspeople fell upon them, and several people fell into whispers. Though Hannah's cheeks remained hot, she had no intention of letting Oliver go.

When they reached home, Rebecca came rushing out of the livery. "Hannah Beth, what's going on? Are you limping?"

Lydia's voice sing-songed as she said, "Apparently they've already seen Abby. Hannah Beth has sprained her ankle."

Rebecca's eyes went wide as she took in the way Oliver and Hannah held each other. "Let me and Lydia help you inside."

"No, Oliver can help me," Hannah answered, and they started up the porch steps.

Once they stepped inside, still holding each other, Mama gasped. "What's going on, Hannah Beth?"

“I’m fine, Mama. I just sprained my ankle.” Hannah knew that she’d never had a close relationship with any male, and never let them touch her. She veritably feared any man’s touch, so to see her this close to Oliver was more than just scandalous to her family.

But Oliver smiled down at her coolly as he helped her sit down in a chair and then he went and sat directly next to her mother’s rocker. “Mrs. Walsh, I’d like to ask if you’d allow me to court your daughter with the purpose of marrying her as soon as possible.”

Mama’s eyebrows raised. “You mean Hannah Beth?”

He nodded, his smile widening. “Only her and no one else.”

“You know that she’s stubborn, right?”

“Mama!” Hannah cried.

He nodded. “It’s one of the things that makes her beautiful. She’s full of fire, honesty, and gentleness, too. I don’t think I could ever love any woman more.”

Hannah sucked in a breath, but her mother just chuckled. Then she leaned forward in her rocking chair. “It’s about time someone appreciated Hannah Beth for all that she’s worth. You have my blessing.”

“Mine, too,” Noah said from behind Rebecca and Lydia, who both still stood in the doorway. Noah stepped around them. “I just came from town. Everyone’s talking about the way that Hannah got hurt and how Mr. Holt carried her all the way to Doctor Abby’s, even though he limped on that false leg. If he can love her enough to do that, I believe that he can handle Hannah’s stubbornness.”

“Noah!” Hannah cried, but at the same time she laughed, and tears began to fall from her eyes.

Oliver came over and sat next to her on the sofa and took her hands in his. They just looked into each other’s eyes, and Hannah found that she couldn’t stop smiling.

“Will you be staying for supper, then?” Lydia asked, tying her apron around her waist.

Just then Missy ran in from the back door in the kitchen. “Did you hear about Mr. Holt and Hannah?”

She stopped dead and slapped a hand over her mouth when she spied the two of them sitting on the sofa with their hands clasped together. Lydia laughed and set a hand on Missy’s shoulder. “We’ve heard... and we’ve seen. Come help me in the kitchen.”

“All right.” Missy barely tore her gaze away from the two on the sofa.

Hannah expected the heat to rise to her cheeks again, but somehow, she no longer felt embarrassed. Instead she felt something quite different. She felt content for the first time in her life. She felt proud that this wonderful man had chosen her. And even though all

her plans for the future had been broken, she couldn't wait to see where Oliver would lead her next.



About the Author



P. Creeden is the sweet romance and mystery pen name for USA Today Bestselling Author Pauline Creeden. She loves a good mystery and grew up watching Colombo, Perry Mason, and Murder, She Wrote. Books have always been a focal point of her life, from Nancy Drew and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to thrillers like John Sanford.

Animals are the supporting characters of many of her stories, because they occupy her daily life on the farm, too. From dogs, cats, and goldfish to horses, chickens, and geckos -- she believes life around pets is so much better, even if they are fictional. P. Creeden married her college sweetheart, who she also met at a horse farm. Together they raise a menagerie of animals and their one son, an avid reader, himself.

If you enjoyed this story, look forward to more books by P. Creeden.
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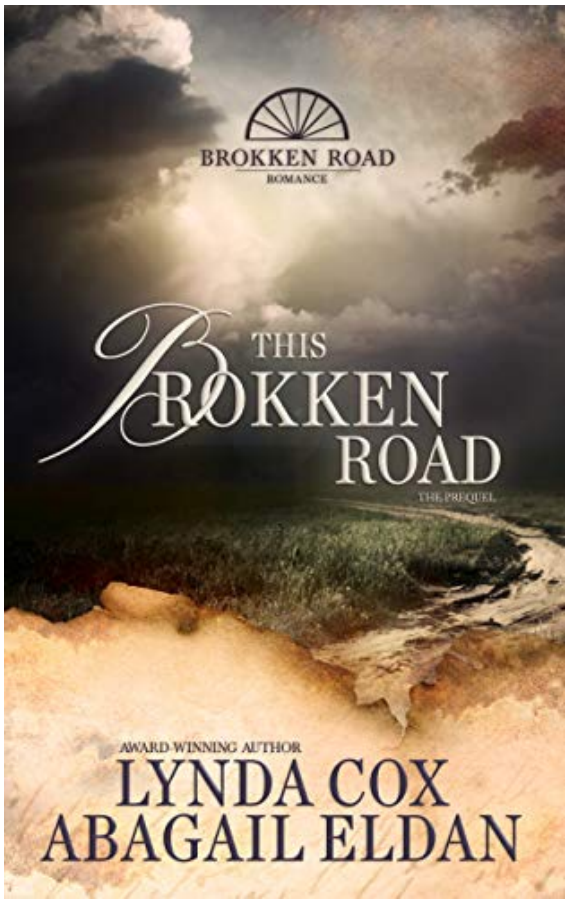
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Storms in life bring devastation but may also clear a Brokken Road.

Abigail Bailey and Deborah Brokken mourn the decimation of their town. Many sons of Brokken, Texas never returned from the Civil War. Those who did remain divided.

Abigail grieves for the loss of her husband and for those around her. Broken lives, broken hearts, and broken dreams haunt the citizens of the town. Deborah, especially, is affected. Her father founded Brokken, and her own brothers have destroyed his legacy.

Is it too late for the good folks of Brokken to unite before their

hometown becomes another casualty of the War?

Brokken Rising



Even the broken can be healed...

Rebecca Walsh has only ever had two loves, her family and horses. But when her father and brother died in the Civil War, her family is left as broken as her home town. When the town sent an advertisement for mail-order grooms, Rebecca didn't have much interest in wooing one. She just hoped the men might save her town, so her family could stay in the only home they'd ever known.

Jake Harper came to Brokken, Texas to leave his name and his past behind. He hoped to find a future that would help him forget the mistakes he'd made. But one of the other "leftover" men in town has been keeping an eye on Jake and his past might be catching up with him. And as he draws closer to Rebecca, his fears multiply.